

The Book of Life: The South African Population Register and the Invention of Racial Descent, 1950–1980

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Abstract:

This article examines the project of racial classification under Apartheid through the operations of the population register. It follows, in particular, a shift in the determination of race from the criterion of 'community acceptance' in the early 1950s to a purely administrative and bureaucratic matter of descent derived from the paperwork in the late 1960s. The study shows that the project Eben Dönges called the 'Book of Life' was at the heart of the planning and practice of the Apartheid state, but that it took two contrasting forms. The first, associated with the green identity cards issued during the 1950s and early 1960s, derived identities and races for six million people, with surprising success, on the basis of the returns to the 1951 census. The second, associated with the inconvenient 50-page Book of Life that was issued after 1970, was a pure case of unrestrained panopticism and a simple failure, failing even to re-register the original population captured by the green identity cards.

 [Breckenridge - 2014 - The Book of Life The South African Population Reg.pdf](#)

Public Positions

Law and Personhood

The assembling of a new set of South African and global citizenships has taken on new urgency and a new plurality twenty years after the supposed advent of freedom. Categories make persons and persons make categories, as Jones and Dlamini have recently pointed out. In the South African constitutional text – where the phrase ‘categories of persons’ is written – race is but one of sixteen categories on the formal list. The Constitutional Court has added more. Indeed, the effort of desegregating publics now takes place without the freshness of new symbols and with potentially stale institutions. In the public sphere, some responses to this era of citizenship reformation harken back to earlier times – either to times of forward-thinking, to times of social-making, or even to times of separating. Other responses rest in a consumptive present or appear as mere promised rhetorical bridges into the future. In this project WISER will examine the new questions that scholars in law, society and the humanities are posing themselves and others. What are the complex fashions in which bounded enclaves and social categories are fraying and unravelling or reforming? How, if at all, are persons remaking themselves as citizens? At the same time that these questions pose themselves, new fields of play are emerging with the changing audiences of the fashion shops and the sports terrains as well as the changing forms and formats of affluence and the new middle class. The very concept of a person as well as their categorical boundaries may shift with the movement of blood, organs, and self-awareness.

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